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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000624

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SUBJECT: THE DEATH OF DAVID LANGE

Classified By: Charge David R. Burnett,  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Former NZ Prime Minister David Lange died on August 13, following a long illness. In the run-up to elections, Prime Minister Clark may be hoping to capitalize on Labour's identity as the heir apparent to Lange and the anti-nuclear policy his Government implemented. Most observers believe any bounce in the polls would be short-lived, however, and we agree. For all New Zealanders' sentimental attachment to Lange, his humor, and his legacy, most regard him as a flawed individual. In any case, the election is still five weeks away and voters are far more likely to vote on matters of current concern regardless.  
End Summary.

2. (U) Former Prime Minister David Lange, who presided over the creation of New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy and break from ANZUS, died late in the evening on August 13 after a long battle with the rare and incurable blood disorder amyloidosis and related illnesses. His death was not unexpected: he had been steadily weakening since being admitted to an Auckland hospital one month ago with diabetes complications.

3. (SBU) New Zealanders generally regard Lange as one of the country's greatest Prime Ministers, noting with special fondness how, with wit and self-assurance, he created a sense of New Zealand as a distinct entity apart from Britain, the United States, and Australia. There is no better symbol of this new identity than the anti-nuclear legislation that was passed under Lange's government. Indeed, it is because the legislation is so deeply associated with New Zealand's emerging identity and post-Vietnam, anti-American stance that so many Kiwis regard altering the ban as akin to spitting on the nation's flag. (Although, unlike the nuclear ban, whether NZ should change its flag is at least a matter of national debate).

4. (SBU) There is little doubt today that Lange decided to implement a ban on nuclear arms as a way to initiate New Zealand's break from ANZUS. By creating friction with the United States which virtually forced the U.S. to expel New Zealand from the alliance, Lange succeeded also in forging an anti-American sentiment here that remains powerful 20 years on. But as former PM Jim Bolger noted in a recent speech, Lange ironically had misgivings about introducing the ban on nuclear propulsion that remains such a sticking point in US-NZ relations today: he believed it was tantamount to telling another country how to handle its domestic policies. He nevertheless agreed to the propulsion ban in the end, in part because it was clear that the public was more worried about the environmental impact of radiation than it was about nuclear arms, and in part because of strong pressure from the more leftist members of his Cabinet (including then-Housing Minister and now PM Clark).

5. (SBU) Unlike former members of his Cabinet such as Health Minister Michael Bassett and Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer, Lange never -- in public or private -- grew to regret the split with the United States. In fact, he was recently quoted as saying that if press reports that the National Party and others were considering changing the nuclear policy were true, he would leave his hospital bed and travel to Wellington in his wheel chair to protest.

6. (SBU) To many former colleagues and observers, Lange was also a deeply flawed individual on both a professional and personal level. Although widely credited for cheering the country through bleak austerity measures that were necessary to prevent total economic collapse, Lange was unable to control the factions in his Government, and if anything fed them. When for example he decided that the austerity measures initiated by then-Finance Minister Roger Douglas had gone too far, Lange took the almost unheard of step of overriding his Cabinet to end the flat tax that Douglas had implemented. This eventually led to the sacking of Douglas and the other architect of austerity, Richard Prebble in 1988, and to Lange's own resignation in 1989. Many in his Government also never forgave him for denying he was having

an affair with his speech writer (whom he eventually married) and even more for allowing himself to be influenced by her views. In a recent TV interview, even Lange confessed that he had come to see himself as invincible and unaccountable to anyone.

17. (SBU) In later life, Lange became more and more isolated. In his autobiography, "My Life," originally slated for September publication but released in early August because of his illness, Lange slams virtually every member of his Government, noting "What a terrible lot they were." Most were cavalier in response, including PM Clark, who Lange accused of having kept out of any inter-Governmental fight as long as her own Housing portfolio was well funded.

18. (U) There will be no official funeral, reportedly at the request of Lange and his family. The Prime Minister has said, however, that she will look into the possibility of an official memorial service. Lange's widow, Margaret Pope, says that for now she is only focused on the private funeral that Lange requested.

19. (U) Sunday and Monday press reports gave wide coverage to Lange's death, including summaries of his life in and out of office and numerous editorial comments. The newspapers also printed quotes from Government officials as well as Don Brash and other opposition leaders, virtually all of which noted Lange's leadership and sense of humor. Prime Minister Howard was also quoted, however, as saying "I respected him, though I obviously disagreed very strongly with his decision to take New Zealand out of the Anzus treaty." A statement from the American Embassy also got wide coverage, appearing above PM Clark's and Dr. Brash's statements in the Sunday Star Times. The statement said, "David Lange led New Zealand through a difficult period of profound changes at home and abroad. He did so with courage, optimism, and humor, the same traits he demonstrated in the face of his illness. He will be missed not only by the people of New Zealand but by his friends in the United States. Our condolences to his family and to the people of New Zealand."

110. (C) Comment: In her remarks on Lange's death, Prime Minister Clark stressed his role in making New Zealand nuclear free, thereby subtly reminding voters yet again of Labour's accusations that the ban would be "gone by lunchtime" in a National-led government. But Clark will not be able to claim fully the mantle of Lange's heir apparent, especially since he criticized her in his recent autobiography. Nor would claims of being his heir apparent necessarily carry a lot of weight with New Zealanders. Although they regard with pride Lange's perceived ability to put New Zealand on the global stage, their affection for him resides largely in his wit and image as a man of the people. (One news piece detailed how Lange won the hearts of a local Auckland cafe owner and his customers.) With the exception of the nuclear legislation, few remember fondly the austerity measures or other Lange Government policies, even if they have endured. And no one would equate the mannerisms of the somber Clark with those of the quick-humored Lange. As the British would say, the two are like chalk and cheese.

Burnett